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Reichert goes to bat for police, ticks off own party

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WASHINGTON — Rep. Dave Reichert broke with Republican leaders in Congress yesterday, proposing to restore \$78 million to a federal program that helped King County hire dozens of deputies when he was sheriff.

The freshman Republican from Auburn lost badly in his attempt to amend the U.S. Justice Department appropriations bill — and antagonized one of the more important Republicans in the House in the process.

In trying to reverse cuts to the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) program, Reichert violated one of the cardinal rules of Congress: Never tick off a cardinal. The cardinals are the 10 powerful chairmen of the subcommittees of the House Appropriations Committee, which controls the federal budget.

One of those cardinals is Frank Wolf, a longtime GOP representative from Northern Virginia who chairs the appropriations subcommittee that oversees the Justice Department budget.

During a floor debate yesterday, Wolf yelled at times and denounced Reichert's proposal for shifting money from federal law enforcement to COPS. Wolf almost accused Reichert himself of being willing to allow terrorist groups and drug gangs to run rampant across America.

"There could be, and probably is, al-Qaida sleeper cells operating in the U.S.," he snapped. "This is a bad amendment."

The COPS program, started under President Clinton, was meant to put 100,000 police officers on the streets. The Bush administration has been cutting its funding in recent years. Reichert proposed restoring additional cuts planned for 2006 with money from the FBI and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA).

The amendment lost 297-130. Republicans Doc Hastings of Pasco and Cathy McMorris of Spokane both supported Reichert; they were joined by Democrats Jay Inslee of Bainbridge Island and Adam Smith of Tacoma.

Reichert did not set out to cause a ruckus among Republicans.

"I spent several days trying to figure out what I would do here," he said in an interview yesterday.

"I went to Mr. Wolf on Friday and told him 'I'm sorry to throw a monkey wrench into your appropriations bill,' " Reichert said. "Let's just say it did not go over very well to begin with."

Relations did not improve during the floor debate.

Wolf cited the deaths of his constituents in the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and suggested that Reichert's proposal would devastate the country's war on methamphetamine. "This amendment would basically take away all of the money in the bill for gangs," he said.

Reichert responded calmly, saying that cutting COPS funding meant that there is no real partnership between local and federal officials.

Wolf came back: "The first telephone call if you found out a loved one was kidnapped would be to the FBI."

In an interview later, Reichert said he was surprised by that statement. "First, you call 911. That's your local police," he said.

Wolf was unavailable for comment after the debate.

"What upset me is that as the sheriff I've heard that local law enforcement is so important to the war on terror," Reichert said. "After 9/11 we were told that local law enforcement has to play a key role ... as first responder," but these cuts would decimate the local effort, he said.

Since 1994, King County has received roughly \$15.6 million from COPS, which has funded 188 sheriff's deputies, a COPS spokesperson said.

Reichert introduced his amendment one month after the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee accused him in a press release of trying to eliminate the COPS program. Reichert disputed that claim, saying it was based on a procedural move by Democrats that failed in the House.

Yesterday's amendment was a classic political battle.

The COPS money would come from federal law-enforcement agencies with a roster of star politicians — including Wolf — willing to defend their budgets. Wolf's district in the D.C. suburbs is home to many FBI offices, and a new FBI records-keeping facility is planned there, too.

The FBI and DEA budgets approved by Congress include millions of dollars more than requested by President Bush.

There's another political wrinkle. "COPS was a Clinton-era program," Reichert said. "The administration decided it was not something we want to keep."

So, he suggested: "What we need to do is just change the name." That's what King County did when the Bush administration wanted to cut money for Project Safe Cities, a crime-prevention program that won an award from former Vice President Al Gore, Reichert said.

The name was changed to Project Safe Neighborhoods, which he said kept it alive.

As a political matter, it can be dangerous to provoke a cardinal because there is a risk that in retaliation, a lawmaker's own appropriations requests will be denied or simply lost in the legislative process.

That's especially true for someone like Reichert, a freshman who won a tough race last fall and has been targeted by the Democrats for 2006.

"I'll be checking tomorrow to see if my appropriations are all still in the final versions," Reichert said with a laugh. His requests include funding for school security officers for King County, a state math initiative, and a gang-intervention program for the Muckleshoot Tribe.

After Reichert's loss, the House approved an amendment by Brian Baird, D-Vancouver, to give \$10 million to COPS. Reichert said a senior congressman told him why Baird succeeded where Reichert failed: He asked for only \$10 million, it was specifically directed at meth abuse and the money would come from the Census Bureau.

Reichert said he was told: "Nobody cares about the Census Bureau." *Alicia Mundy: 202-662-7457 or amundy@seattletimes.com*

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